

**Betwixt and between:
pubescent liminality and contested places in fiction for young people.**

Dr Stephen Bigger, University of Worcester

University of Worcester, Worcester, UK WR2 6AJ

Abstract

Fiction for young people is targeted at readers crossing the line between childhood and young adulthood. Stories aimed at these readers depict the in-between state where young characters perform mature courageous deeds (whilst adult characters may do childish things). The transition between childhood and adulthood has been termed *liminal* (Victor Turner) demonstrating a transitional journey from one state to the other. This article will apply Turner's thesis of liminality and community building (*communitas*) to fiction for young people that has relevance to ideas of nature and place, viewing story as a threshold or portal to meaning. I survey some twentieth century writers' approaches, ending with three twenty-first century examples, exploring how writers handle the concepts of natural/supernatural, ecology, and ethics of place. I explore the extent to which story scaffolds growing up to young adulthood. Victor Turner also applied liminality to theatre and performance, to betwixt and between ideas and mental states, topsy-turvy reversal-of-status ritual/carnival which makes good performances so powerful and potentially life changing. Books are performances: books in one culture are performed stories in others, and some books become films or theatre plays.

The stories selected reflect place as contested, emphasising the needs of humans and animals, and giving value to sharing and respect rather than greed. This article views this liminality as potentially educational, helping to change attitudes to nature, place and the environment through imaginative and playful means. Examples are the use of folklore, myth, adventure, mystery and cooperative activities. I raise as an issue whether 'fantastical' elements (Toderov 1973 – i.e. magic, myth, the supernatural) are helpful or hindrances to learning and understanding about nature, place and environment.

Keywords. Ecology, nature, adolescence, growing up, understanding of place, the fantastic.

Growing Up with Fiction

Fiction plays a role in growing up. Of course, children and young people encounter a wide range of influences from film and television as well as from books. This article considers the potential of particular books since 1940 relating to the natural world and environment as contributions to the psychological and social processes of growing up. I focus in particular on whether fiction can help young people come to terms with the natural world, and build ethical concepts that affect choices and attitudes. I explore whether insights based on this could be used to evaluate stories aimed at the 8-13 age range. Stories aimed at this age group depict an in-between state where young characters perform mature courageous deeds (whilst adult characters may do childish things). The young people usually have adventures which help them to build stronger relationships and friendships, and to meet situations which help them strengthen their values by engaging with a good role model, or seeing the consequences of a bad one. The adults in the story may model good or bad behaviour, and be learning devices.

This suggests that stories for young people can be tools for moral education, but this is simplistic. Childhood is not just a preparation for adult life. Children and young people experience life, and their life has to make sense. Literature which engages and interests may illustrate attitudes and behaviours that children will meet, and perhaps feel in themselves. The transition between childhood and adulthood has been termed *liminal*, that is, having a threshold quality, as though moving from one room to another. I draw on the work of Victor Turner, himself influenced by Arnold van Gennep's idea of rites of passage. Turner, on the basis of anthropological data, suggested a transitional journey from one state to the other, and from childhood to adulthood in particular. He expanded this to examine the extent to which social performance contributes to community building (*communitas*). This article asks whether story can be part of this transitional journey, providing a threshold or portal to deeper understanding of life.

Liminality, Turner, rite of passage child to adult

I have given full accounts of Turner's work elsewhere (Bigger 2009, in press). Turner repeated himself in many works, and *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), fortunately still in print, is a concise account. In anthropological accounts, children became adults through a ceremony, a rite of passage, a point he gleaned from Van Gennep. The state of being 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1967) is what he called *liminal*. Turner (1967, 1974) began to think about 'social drama' in general, as ways of minimizing tension in the community, and latterly about modern performance, especially on occasions when social drama has helped understanding and changed attitudes. Modern examples might be a performance questioning gang rivalry in Romeo and Juliet in Lebanon or Rwanda, to see the effects of tribalism, or Aids awareness performances in Africa (Bigger and Thomas, 1999). Turner argued that performance could be socially therapeutic, and that other performances such as in the theatre, or street carnivals, could be analysed in the same way – not so much a spontaneous social drama but a constructed one, for which he used the word *liminoid*, that is, a crafted piece *resembling* a liminal social performance and with similar therapeutic outcomes. This suggests that a film, or drama, or theatre performance can inspire deep emotional responses, and help the audience to think differently about some aspect of life. In this article, a book is viewed as a social performance, which (whether dramatised or not) enables readers to enter into the world that the story creates, exploring

emotions and relationships within it, solving problems, and discovering what type of person the reader wants to be. When the target readership are themselves between childhood and adulthood, this closely resembles liminal performances which in primal societies educate children to have the competence to contribute to the adult community.

For primal societies, initiation has to avoid or neutralise spirit dangers: in western society we are more used to being concerned with emotional and psychological dangers. I contend here that these are similar. A spirit danger is visualised in a particular form, so that when this demon is chased away, those involved will feel free of it. People will take different views as to whether these dangers are 'real' or 'visualised'. Young people have to face fear, anxiety, despair, hopelessness, low self image and so on, and the nurturing and initiation activities might attempt to neutralise these and provide understanding and skills to engage the young person or control them. A story is an ideal medium for this, as realism, metaphor, fantasy, visualisation can rub shoulders. If the young reader is helped on the journey to personal maturity, it will have been successful. We emphasise again the notion of threshold – a story is a door to something new, to the future, to wisdom and understanding. For each child there is also a threshold, between dependence and independence, between childhood and adulthood. Crossing this is about becoming confident in their understanding of self, responsible in actions and attitudes to others, and understanding of the consequences of actions and inactions.

So, the liminality betwixt and between childhood and adulthood features in fiction for young people. Turner talked of circumstances turned upside down, carnival-style; in a similar way, dependent children are described in story as independent, even world redeemers. Instead of being taught (and being passive), stories show children learning by experience and by activities. Children in fact can gain confidence and vicarious experience through the story. The story itself can act as a doorway between their social lives and their inner world by identifying with role models. As the characters go through life-changing events and relationships, so readers can apply their strategies and resolutions to their own lives. For Turner, performance leads to mindset change, both in primal, spirit-imbued tribes and in the modern theatre. Viewing story as social performance, the young reader is a participant in this performance: their mindsets can change, whether this change is for good or ill.

Stories and growing up

Stories about the passage from childhood to adulthood have been called *bildungsroman*. Kimberley Reynolds 2007: 72 refers to them more properly as *entwicklungsroman*, that is, stories involving growth and development. Literature is part of the influences on young people's inner emotional, relational and intellectual growth towards maturity. There is no sudden line between being a child and being an adult. There is a long process within which the words child – youth – adult are essentially meaningless. A child may be wise beyond their years, especially if they have carer responsibilities; conversely adults may be immature in spite of their years. Children may need to understand that adults do not always know best and are not to be blindly obeyed, a message that lies behind child-abuse guidance. So we need a very flexible way of describing growing up. Liminality in Turner's sense is about the community recognizing adulthood by officially changing a person's status. In tribal communities, the young person may have had to earn the right to this, by ordeals, responsibilities or tasks. We will see all three of these below in James Vance Marshall's *The Children* through the

experiences of an Australian aborigine boy who does not survive the requirements of his coming of age ordeal. Fiction can provide characters with whom the reader can identify and empathise, and a storyline that links to their experience and goes beyond it. Some modern fiction is a portal to imaginary worlds, past, present or future, and sometimes surreal, parallel worlds, magic domains, or a hole in time. Each 'portal' has a potentiality for deep, life-changing learning.

Emotive and Contested place.

Emotional response to place have normally focused on awesome landscape and beautiful scenery. People may have emotional responses to favourite places, and conservation groups might be sent up to protect it – such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). These range between natural wildernesses, such as mountain ranges, and landscapes constructed by human activities (such as farming). To young people brought up in a city, such landscapes might actually seem threatening and alien, different or other. A study of everyday experience in place might range from crude description to phenomenology (understanding everyday experiences emphasising emotions over facts). The term 'spirituality' is used non-religiously to denote deep emotional and ontological significances within the inner person. Elaine Riley-Taylor (2002) emphasises spirituality as 'relational knowing', marked by social justice, interrelationship and community (a reminder of Victor Turner's *communitas* or community building). Two writers for young people are discussed below for whom spirituality is neo-pagan. Buell (2005: 97-127) arguing from literature in general, develops the move from anthropocentrism (the world for human benefit) to ecocentrism (putting the environment first) in ways which enhance environmental justice. Looking to the future, he applauds the inventiveness and creativity of educators (p.132) and seeks a future for environmental criticism in devising new ways to inspire young people. Our examples below show some evolution towards this, and leave us in hope of better work still to come as this agenda becomes explicitly understood.

This concern for ethics emphasises for young readers that place is 'contested'. Others have a claim on what we think of as 'ours'. Postcolonial literature is concerned with land ownership having been unjustly taken from aboriginal peoples. In Europe, we have folk memories, and hard history, of twentieth century wars of expansion, which involved expansion for 'living room' (*lebensraum*). Some European countries were occupied and its resolution in 1945 left an iron curtain dividing free Europe from soviet-occupied lands. There is a history, the world over, of contested land. In the UK, the threat of occupation inspired a literature of its own. The old European empires have left a residue of uncertainty about ethical land ownership. Land is also contested between human needs and animal habitat, whether in the creation of a wild life reserve, or in the destruction of habitat for buildings or roads. 'Ownership' of land is not simple concept, even where a purchase has taken place. For young people growing up, place is not something to take for granted. Public spaces require public custodianship and responsibility. Gardens may be a last hope for wildlife. There is much the young can do to make a difference.

Some examples.

I now explore examples of novels for the young over the last fifty years. I have selected titles that focus in various ways on place and the environment which together contribute to developing theory. Clearly this treatment cannot be exhaustive.

James Vance Marshall's *The Children* (1959, set in Australia and later renamed *Walkabout*) and *A River Ran Out of Eden* (1962, set on the Aleutian Islands, off Alaska) depict characters in extreme regions, the Australian desert, and the arctic winter. *The Children* is essentially about a white girl, Mary, coming to terms with blackness and with boys. The aborigine boy was always called "the bush boy" and nicknamed "darkie" by her young brother Peter, and she has an effect on him that she could not comprehend – her horror at him and his nakedness he interpreted as the approach of the Spirit of Death. The girl and her young brother were stranded in the desert after a plane crash and met the "bush boy" on his coming of age walkabout. It is explained how this exercise in self-survival was traditional at coming of age, and prepared boys to be fully functioning adults. It was dangerous, and not all survived. He was drawn to help the children at a risk to his own life, but was poorly repaid. The picture of desert survival is vividly described, and after the boy's death Mary is more comfortable with an aborigine family with a baby that they meet. That aborigines and whites contest Australian land lies in the background. His death is symbolically the death of the aborigine way of life. The children aim for a white homestead – they do not have survival skills. There is a spark of relationship with the black family, but the story ends with racial segregation. Mary is fond of the baby – so perhaps it is in the new generation that change will come.

A River Ran Out of Eden shows readers a frozen wilderness. The wild animals, such as seal, were hunted and traded. The story revolves around Eric son of a trapper who delights in a golden seal and her cub. To a trapper, the golden pelt is worth money, and the stories tension comes from the joint dangers posed by his trapper father and a stranger who targets the golden seal. The hunting of seal in general is put under a spotlight through Eric's eyes, and more broadly hunting in general. Humans share the environment with other animals and birds, and bonds of friendship are set as the ideal.

Michael Morpurgo's *Little Foxes* is set in an urban wilderness where swans and foxes come centre stage. Running an educational farm for city children, Morpurgo is no stranger to city children. This is a dark book. Billy is a foundling, dumped at birth, and in and out of foster homes and schools, inflicted with a stammer. He found a wilderness, a ruined chapel with canal behind, and spent his spare time there watching and protecting nature. One day boys pelt a cygnet but Billy rushes out, beats their dog back with a stick. They had killed the mother and other cygnets, we are led to think. The confident act cured his stammer and the story moves on. When the almost mature cygnet departs, he comes aware of a family of foxes. The vixen is killed by a car so he tries to look after the cubs. Three are killed as vermin, but he saves the fourth, brings it up and releases it. There is a twist in the end, and the final scene is about interdependency:

"If any of them had looked out of the window at that moment they would have seen a solitary swan standing by the duckpond, looking up at the house. Round her left leg she wore a red plastic ring. She waddled towards the pond and settled into the waters, frightening the ducks out of the pond. Then she was taking off, her wings beating the water behind her, her legs paddling the water, lifting her high into the air down the lime avenue towards the swannery, all her debts paid, her mission accomplished at last" (199-200)

It is romantic and unrealistic, of course, but it cements a notional connection between animals and humans.

Colin Dann's (1979) the Farthing Wood series feature animals as main characters, depicting them as a human-like community. He was not of course the first, as there are earlier examples by Richard Church on squirrels, Richard Adams on rabbits and William Horwood on moles. The depicted animal relations are strange. Small mammals lose out since they are viewed as food. Larger mammals play tricks like leading animals to sick food animals, or jealously pushing a colleague animal to its death in a water tank. This emotional anthropomorphism seems inappropriate. Readers nevertheless see animal life as meaningful but fragile, dependent on specialised food, and very dependent on their habitat. Readers see the effects of building developments and total habitat loss. Sometimes in stories for the very young, toys and animals take the place of child characters as a distancing measure, but in Dann, animals are themselves, their emotions and stresses expressed in human language, their anxieties and pains pictured as human emotions. This might reduce the feeling of animals as other and recognise that the land claimed by humans is also vital for animals.

In the current century, Michelle Paver offers a six-volume *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* starting with *Wolf Brother* (2004). This is the close-to-nature story of a pre-historic young boy, Torak, and girl, Renn put in positions of great danger. There is an overall message of respecting nature, not taking more than you need, thanking plants and animals for taking life, and generally living in tune with nature. The story element is created around the children being saviours of the world, pitting their strength and wits against tangible evil, that is evil powers which are real. Children are really turned into demons, a bear really is an instrument of evil, and the boy really can have out of the body (and into someone else's body) experiences. The mind-set depicted, to be true, is the superstitious shamanic beliefs supposed to apply in early human communities, and these are the narrator's 'pagan' assumptions. There are hints that there are elements of mind over matter. A tattoo administered as an initiation to becoming a soul eater is resisted. The whole infrastructure of evil should be irresistible, but is resisted. The weak overcome the strong. This is a story of agency, that the young can affirm their own values against adult pressure. It is a tribal tale also, with different tribes coming to terms with each other. Torak is of no tribe, is an outcast for a while, but turns this eventually into a strength; so it is a story of resistance to social structures such as Turner called 'anti-structure', or life as community-evolving process. It is a story both of growing up and of coming of age, a severe rite of passage which resists evil, social pressure and greed.

Isobel Allende set similar themes in a modern tale, a trilogy which sees a teenage couple, Alex and Nadia, first in the Amazon, and later in the Himalayas and in central Africa. They are both growing up, discovering hidden strengths and building relationships and values, the girl from a wilderness background, the boy from middle America. The plots consist of blood and thunder adventure, the children having to quickly become self sufficient the hard way. Romance is downplayed, though the girl and boy are the closest of real friends, and Nadia's assumption that they would marry comes to Alex as a great relief at the end. The experience of the local environments (rainforest, mountains, and jungle) is respectful of biodiversity, animal welfare and human rights. A key passage in *Forest of the Pygmies* mystically shows the youngsters the spirits of the forest and all living things, and the totality of all things. Mysticism is declared to be the revealing of hidden realities, a neo-paganism that comes in all three books. Nadia can talk to most animals, and is saved by a gorilla and an elephant who are honouring their debts.

She has also learnt how to make herself invisible. Their tasks are to save an Amazonian tribe from genocide by measles injection, a Himalayan kingdom from attack, and a pygmy tribe from slavery at the hands of an ivory poacher. At the denouement, Nadia 'becomes' an eagle, her totem, and summons help; Alex 'becomes' a jaguar, his totem, and defeats the tyrant. These are real transformations: however the reader has to take them metaphorically, as taking on the attributes of their totem animals to give strength and focus. It is curious that many writers for children assume that extraordinary forces are at work and that magic is real. Amulets and potions really work. Provided that children understand the device (i.e. the pretence), this offers a vivid understanding of metaphor. Allende opposes oppression, greed and profiteering (the Himalayan king says that ecology should come before economy, meaning responsibility before greed). All books are dominated by a desire for social justice and respect for life against enemies who seek to profit by death. The children's struggles against cruelty and injustice are in fact struggles against consumerism. Nadia owns nothing; Alex, in order to obtain a cure for his mother's cancer, has to give away his most precious possession, his father's flute. Consumerism is said to obscure real wealth. We must choose between possessing or becoming fulfilled. The two cannot coexist, and fulfilment presupposes social justice and respect.

Terry Pratchett's *Nation* (2008) was inspired by the Christmas Tsunami but set in 1860. A young teenager Mau is returning home from his coming of age initiation on the 'Boys' Island' when the tsunami strikes. The white girl Ermintrude/Daphne has been wrecked on route to her colonialist father and has to come to terms with this 'savage' boy, after failing to shoot him on their first meeting, her first encounter with "a native". Mau is always the dignified savage. He accepts the gun gratefully (fortunately the powder was wet) as a machine to produce fire. She insists on wearing clothes, to his great amusement and astonishment (she is referred to throughout as 'trouserwoman'). As the only survivor of his community (unfortunately they were all killed on the beach awaiting his return) he accepts his leadership role and his responsibility for the funeral rites of the dead. As older people drift in, he remains in charge. He has a mental disagreement with the spirit ancestors, who in his head accuse him of failing to uphold tradition. He tries, but soon realises that tradition is flawed. The women ancestors tell a different story, and once not crowded out by the men, their view holds sway. People must move on, live, build for the future.

The children discover an ancient history in which their real ancestors were scientists back to the stone age. In their relics are great riches, but Mau decides to negotiate an equal partnership with the British through the Royal Society rather than become a colony (that is, be invaded). They invite the landing party to put the flag away; and we end with a flash forward to today, when scientists work there at an observatory. There were alternatives to empire, but it took two young people to show the way, resisting both evil tyrants and benevolent despots. The land remains in communal hands, managed by merit. It is a story of community building by cooperation, Turner's *communitas*, seeking creative solutions to recover from extreme natural disaster and building for the future common good.

Conclusions

Growing up towards adulthood is something young people have to do for themselves. In the process they may accidentally hurt people, and be hurt, but need to

learn from this. Their values may differ from the adults they know, but maturation is about growing independence of thought, so their own views and perspectives are important. Turner linked together a number of features: coming of age, crossing thresholds, social process, community building (*communitas*), and social performance. A story-book is a public performance which at best can contribute to both personal growth and social development. Stories for young people represent a liminal, 'betwixt and between' life between child and adult, as constructed by adult writers. For Turner, such 'performances' are part of the process of society itself coming to terms with assumptions and status: stories which do this should have an effect on readers and audience, and contribute to a changing society. In the west, the liminal period between childhood and adulthood is long, and we use the in-between status of 'adolescent' for it, and this has consequences for adolescent attitudes and behaviour. Being trusted and being trustworthy are part of the same social process. In fiction adolescents can be treated as adults, and although this provides a role model, it is also likely to be outside of the experience of young readers whose realities are controlled by adult hegemony at home and at school. In today's risk-averse society, stories may be the only arenas in which they can freely operate, albeit mentally. If so, literature is an alternative (if imaginary) world in which experience and learning can take place.

Fiction for adolescents can assist intellectual, aesthetic and ethical development. To do so, stories have to raise issues in ways which require young readers to make choices and take sides. Generally, the separation between good and bad characters is clear and unambiguous, so the author's voice offers guidance and direction in how to apply the characters' choices to their own lives and experiences. Fantastical plots take this process out of the readers' ordinary experience and ethical dilemmas may be more difficult to interpret. This need not be a problem, so long as adolescent readers are enabled to read texts more subtly, engaging with underlying issues beneath a fast moving plot. This is certainly an issue for teachers and parents. Writers and publishers may also be able to find ways of helping young readers to engage with stories in ways which stimulate thinking and moral choices.

References

Allende, Isabel, *City of the Beasts* London: Harper Perennial, 2000.

Allende, Isabel, *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon* London: Harper Perennial, 2004.

Allende, Isabel, *Forest of the Pygmies* London: Harper Perennial, 2005.

Bigger, Stephen, "Review Article: Victor Turner, Liminality and Cultural Performance". *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 30 (1). pp. 1-5, 2009

Bigger, Stephen, Thresholds, liminality and fruitful chaos: revolutionary change in education? *Educational Futures* (British Education Studies Association), in press.

Bigger, Stephen and David Thomas, Drama, in Stephen Bigger and Erica Brown (eds.) *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education: Exploring Values in the Curriculum*, London: David Fulton, 1999.

Buell, Lawrence, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Dann, Colin, *The Animals of Farthing Wood* London: Heinemann, 1979.

Ellis, C. Evocative autoethnography: writing emotionally about our lives, in W. Tierney and Y. Lincoln, (eds.), *Representation and the text: re-framing the narrative voice*, New York: SUNY Press, 1997.

Marshall, James Vance, *The Children (=Walkabout)* London: Michael Joseph, 1959.

Marshall, James Vance, *A River Ran Out of Eden* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1962.

Morpurgo, Michael, *Little Foxes* London: Kaye and Ward, 1984.

Paver, M. *Wolf Brother*. London: Orion Children's Books, 2004.

Pratchett, Terry, *Nation* London: Doubleday, 2008.

Reynolds, Kimberley, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Riley-Taylor, Elaine, *Ecology, Spirituality and Education: Curriculum for Relational Knowing* (Studies in Post-Modern Theory of Education 201) New York: Peter Lang, 2002.

St. John, Graham (ed.), *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008.

Toderov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973.

Turner, Victor W. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* pp. 93-111. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967.

Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.

Turner, Victor W. (1974) *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974.

Turner, Victor W. *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1982.

Van Gennep, Arnold, *The Rites of Passage*, English trans 1960 by M. B. Vizedom and G.L.Caffee, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1908.